The Death of Spin

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To Mobbs,
who still wants to live with a writer

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Preface

On a City desk as a young journalist on a mass-circulation newspaper, I was once told that I was writing a story for just six people in the financial markets who mattered. More frequently, I realised that we were writing for our colleagues and rivals in Fleet Street rather than for the readers. Like Planet Westminster, the world of journalism and communications can be both metropolitan and parochial and we in it need to be alert to the dangers of re-telling stories to each other. I have tried not to adopt that mentality in writing this book, partly because this is a book for the lay reader, who nevertheless may be an interested observer of the culture we call 'spin', and partly because my editor wouldn't let me. So I trust that the obvious in-jokes and point-scoring have been excised. But the difference between an illuminating anecdote and being a media-luvvy is a fine one, so I hope readers will appreciate that it's the world I know and forgive me for the inward-looking nature that is its characteristic. A further implication of an insider writing a book like this is that it is necessarily subjective. It is neither a 'how-to-spin' handbook, nor pretends to be an exhaustive contemporary history of spin-culture. So you won't be told how to do it and there are some popular figures missing that I think are either not relevant to the subject of the book or boring. That said, most books on this subject have either been dry and worthy management or political manuals or scary exposés of high-profile figures. I hope that what follows is neither – but rather a guided tour through the rat-runs below and beside the corridors of media, industrial and political power as the

spin-culture of our times rose and fell. If nothing else, it might explain to a number of bewildered relatives where we've all been these past 20 years or so.

George Pitcher

Acknowledgements

Anyone who has ever been in journalism knows that research amounts to a visit to the clippings library – true, the source may be on-line now, but it amounts to the same thing. The equivalent for communications professionals is the ability to plunder the intellectual property of one's colleagues. In this regard, I am blessed indeed. I co-founded our consultancy a decade ago with Charles Stewart-Smith and since have been privileged to plagiarise one of the finest communications minds of his generation. I am also in debt to my partners for their variety of political, industrial and commercial insights – they are Amy Kroviak, Ben Rich, Andrew Sharkey, Chris Springham, Douglas Trainer, Simon Whale and David Wheeldon. Further insights have come from my governing board, chaired by John Booth, and I thank John Preston and Nick Taylor for wisdom. Further thanks: All the colleagues who have covered my back at the office while I wrote this book, especially Jon Bennett, Jo Bird, Daniel Guthrie, Emma Leeds and their account teams. Despo Ptohopoulos was endlessly tolerant and supportive of me in the field, Bonnie Dixon researched and helped me to remember what I was doing in the Eighties and Christina Lau kept me wired with the patience of angels. My colleagues at Financial Issues, Jonathan Dewe, Clive Horwood and Adrian Thomas, educated me in the fixed-income markets, while Richard Bridges made sense of equities. Importantly, if anonymously, many figures in Westminster and Whitehall spoke to me and trusted me with what they said – you know who you are. Infonic's brain-boxes taught me all I need to know about corporate exposure to the internet – Mark Bunting, Roy Lipski and Orlando Plunket Greene.

Tom Bentley, James Wilsdon and Eddie Gibb at Demos for encouragement, a platform, a pamphlet and a whole lot more. Peter Wilson of Delta Pearl and Strategos thought of questions about corporate communications that nobody else had and one day, albeit briefly, made me a visiting lecturer at INSEAD. Then, substantially, there's the team at Wiley that made it happen – my editor Sally Smith, Julia Lampam, Tracy Clayton, Amie Tibble, Sandra Heath and Benjamin Earl; plus Martin Key for the copy edit. And, finally, if you've just bought this book, or perhaps just borrowed it, thankyou.

Introduction

Things could only get better in 1997, or so the triumphant supporters of the UK Labour Party believed as they celebrated their first election victory for nearly 18 years. Western stock-markets were gripped by what the chairman of the Federal Reserve called an 'irrational exuberance' that was going to push the longest bull market in history into the new millennium. Bill Clinton's Democrats had been, surprisingly, returned despite his peccadilloes. There were only distant rumblings of a Millennium Bug that might wreak havoc on the world's computers. There was no global war on terror. In the UK the Tories had been marginalised, the Queen Mother was still looking forward to the celebrations of her 100th birthday, Peter Mandelson was Minister Without Portfolio at the Cabinet Office and David Beckham had not yet been sent off against Argentina. Enron was a highly successful energy-trading company and business was booming. It is my contention that the West was also gripped by a spin-culture that in the UK had developed in the early days of Margaret Thatcher's premiership and in which the appearance of things enjoyed precedence over their content. The new imperialists and colonisers were the global brands, whether the background fabric of society engineered by Coca-Cola or Microsoft, or the fabric itself in the shape of Nike, Benetton or Lacoste – what they wore defined the masses and was a mark of success. Failure – for British generations the honourable mark of the heroic underdog – became a mark of, well, failure and 'loser' moved into the international English lexicon as an expression of casual contempt, rather than of respect and pity. Winning at all costs, whether in business or in politics, became the new credo. It defined New Labour, the new white-hats,

and pushed the equity markets. It was a culture that venerated appearance and promoted position over priority. This book is about the rise and fall of that spin-culture.

Contemporary culture is most easily defined by personal experience. For me, two events that will have passed entirely unnoticed by national news networks and the world of politics marked the rise and fall of spin. The first was my unremarkable departure from newspaper journalism in the early Nineties to join the emerging spin-culture. The second was an equally unremarkable after-dinner speech I gave nearly a decade later to mark the demise of that culture.

When I left *The Observer* at Christmas 1991, my leaving do was in the cellar bar of the Red Lion in Whitehall. The venue was to gain some notoriety in spinning circles some years later, when, in 1998, it became the stage on which Charlie Whelan performed his swan song, a brief too far on Chancellor Gordon Brown's intentions for the euro.

My colleagues had ritually prepared the mock-up of an *Observer* front-page with a 'good riddance' theme and only some of the not-so-tearful tributes referred to my intended future career as a spin-doctor. This was a relatively new job-title at the time. Those who followed American socio-cultural trends were aware of it, but the role, the job, the 'people who live in the dark' as Labour's Clare Short was to call us, were yet to become a villainous part of popular culture. I went to a *Private Eye* lunch in 1992 where the term came as news to editor Ian Hislop, who suggested that in my case 'spin-proctologist' might be more appropriate, with apparent reference to what I spoke through. This may not have been entirely unrelated to me telling him that he should quit the newly-created *Have I Got News For You* because Paul Merton was frying him. (More than a decade's worth of highly successful Hislop performances in HIGNFY later, this probably ranks among the worst piece of image advice I have ever proffered. Anyway, I was never invited again.)

By the mid-Nineties, 'spin-doctor' was part of common parlance in metropolitan and some provincial circles. I remember it was a term of abuse at the Tory Party conference in Bournemouth in 1996. In his etymological column in the *Independent on Sunday* that year, Nicholas Bagnall made an attempt at identifying its provenance:

> Sailors were spinning yarns to each other in Nelson's time and could hardly be blamed for trying to shorten a tedious sea voyage by stretching the story. It must have been the landlubbers who borrowed the phrase to suggest that yarn-spinners were liars ... The spin, as practised at Westminster, has nothing to do with yarns of wool, nor with the webs spun by spiders. It comes from baseball – spin-doctor was first used in the States in the 1980s – though here we think of it more in terms of cricket. In either case, deception is the name of the game. The bowler (or pitcher) hopes the batsman (or batter) will forget that balls he is delivering are not always the balls he seems to be delivering.

Perhaps consciously, this echoed Michael Heseltine's *tour de force* at that year's conference, when he sent up the studious Shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown's 'neoclassical endogenous growth theory and a symbiotic relationship between investment in people and infrastructure' as something he had learned at the knee of his even more academic economic adviser Ed Balls – 'It's not Brown's at all, it's Balls.' Spin-doctors had grown up quickly in the UK, now operating at the level of presentation of economic theory, not just sorting the media at street level. Ed Balls is a Fellow of the Royal College of Spin Surgeons, rather than a sawbones media-mountebank.

They were said to have American parents, legitimate or otherwise. This derivation would have it that we were always pitchers, rather than spin-bowlers. (Your author's name, incidentally, is genuine.) Whether or not spin-doctoring was an import from the States, there is something of a chicken-and-egg conundrum as to whether it came from New Labour's communications' bunker, supposedly under the command of Peter Mandelson, or whether it surfaced first in the British media and was subsequently ascribed to New Labour.

The Guardian, probably the strongest media-trend monitoring service on the street, is a suspect in any investigation into the naming of spin. Political Editor Michael White and former City Editor and Washington correspondent Alex Brummer appear to have first claim on the term 'spin-doctor' in a *Guardian* article as far back as January 1988. A decade later, *The Scotsman* was writing about how everyone had a spin-doctor and that even the Queen had

given the role some sort of royal warrant with the appointment of Simon Lewis, the public relations cheese to his brother William's journalistic chalk-stripe at the *Financial Times*, as communications secretary. James Kirkup recorded that the job-title was first whispered during the Republicans' presidential campaign, coined to help 'clarify' George Bush's statements to journalists. And, boy, did they need clarifying. For the Democrats, the diminutive and phenomenally sharp-witted George Stephanopoulos provided the counter-spin, later becoming a key adviser to President Clinton. During the 1994 presidential campaign, the Democrats' chief media strategist, James Carville, was married to one of Republican candidate Bob Dole's advisers, Mary Matalin, who stepped down when Dole eventually decided that there could be a conflict of interest between the day job and the conjugal bed.

Kirkup went on to record the trick of distracting the public from potentially embarrassing facts as a key talent of the new breed of spin-doctors. The satirical movie *Wag the Dog* was just out in 1998 and portrayed Robert De Niro as a spin-doctor hired to distract attention from the president's sexual peccadillo. His strategy is to start a war with Albania and the president is swept back to power. Whether life has imitated art or vice versa, Margaret Thatcher's re-election poll ratings on the back of the Falklands War, George Bush's popularity when he drove Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait (history will judge his son's scrap with Iraq) and Bill Clinton's successful sabre-rattling at Iraq during the Monica Lewinsky affair show how powerful the technique has proved to be.

The use of alternative 'news' to knock negatives off the front-pages is nothing new in politics, however much outrage might be generated by the supposedly original spin-sin of suggesting that the day of a terrorist attack in the States might be a good one on which to bury bad news. But there was a sense that something new had developed in British politics and, more broadly, in all the establishment institutions, from the Church and the Royal Family to the arts. It no longer mattered in the Nineties what something was, it was how it appeared. You no longer argued about an issue, you argued a position.

Presentation had become all – from business, where perceived value had become actual value in the fixing of share-prices, to the

theatre and movies, where it no longer mattered so much what it was, but what your opinion of it was. Across society there was a new vacuity; style was not just more important than substance, it overcame it. We no longer seemed to discuss what something was, but what we thought of it. Over the past 20 years, the media, industry, politics, the establishment and the arts have conspired to bring us not their constituent parts, but a presentation of what they would like us to think they are. There should be a term for this, for the zeitgeist that we have come to live in: It is a spin-culture – and that is what I shall call it in this book.

Maybe it originated with the lurid manipulations surrounding Clinton's Zippergate or maybe with Derek Draper in the UK boasting about the names on his pager and the '17 people in New Labour that matter', of which, of course, he was one. Maybe it came from the efficiency with which New Labour ran its media management because if there's one thing that the British electorate mistrusts, it's efficient politics. But, whatever the cause, a decade after the term had been introduced to British society, it had become a solid pejorative. It is not just that the opposite of substance in politics or commerce has become spin, it is that anything of which one disapproves has become spin. Thus by mid-term in the first New Labour parliament, the Prime Minister was only rarely referred to in his own right on communicational matters and more usually as 'Tony Blair and his spin-doctors' or some variant. Political, economic and, indeed, commercial debate is blighted by a dearth of dialectic, for the easiest and most damning knock-out critical conclusion of the new antithesists is 'it's all spin'.

What does that mean? At one level it means a lack of substance, interpretation parading as fact, image creation at the expense of tangible evidence. But the intuitive, tongue-jerk response of 'it's all spin' is symptomatic of a deeper malaise in our collective consciousness. It implies that there is little of value in our institutions. The rare exception of something of true worth proves the rule that the majority is vacuous and superficial. From its genesis in business and politics, spin-culture has infected our arts, our secular institutions and our faiths. For all that is not gospel truth or true art is part of the spin-culture that we have developed for ourselves.

There is evidence that the primacy of this spin-culture is about two decades old, though its roots are buried in the liberalism and social revolutions of the second half of the twentieth century. And there are signs that it has run its course – most visibly in politics, where spin-culture is a most apparent irritant, but also throughout commercial life, where shareholders and corporate activists are no longer tolerating shallow justifications of greed and gluttony. François Rabelais held that nature abhors a vacuum and it may be that the entire socio-economic structure that spin-culture supports will implode on itself. From the black hole that spin-culture's collapsing star will have created may emerge new forms of political, commercial, institutional and artistic life – and this book heralds them. But spin-culture has to die first – which brings me to the other unremarkable event; the one that made me hear spin's death-rattle.

I was invited, in early July 2000, to give an after-dinner speech at the Athenaeum Club in London's Pall Mall. My hosts were a dining club called the City & Westminster, which sounded like an interesting axis of power, and I was provisionally billed as 'A Spin-Doctor Confesses'. The guest list of the C&W did not suggest that I would be addressing a broad spectrum of politics, or indeed anyone from the left or even centre-left of that spectrum. As one Tory friend disarmingly emailed me before the event: 'I expect the form to be cocktails at 7 and holocaust denial by 9.'

In the event, they were very kind, listening attentively and even laughing in some of the right places. My audience was a mixture of Thatcher's Tories and some blue-chip industrialists, with a sprinkling of intelligence services and journalism and I was pleased, given that these were constituencies that are likely to be hostile to the spin-doctor's craft, to be reasonably well received.

But, then again, that may have had something to do with having changed the title of my address to 'The Death of Spin'. Any predominantly right-wing audience could be forgiven in the summer of 2000 for indulging in a little *schadenfreude*. The BBC had just led on the news that thriller-writer Ken Follett had laid into Prime Minister Tony Blair for being, among other things, 'unmanly'. Ken and his wife, New Labour MP Barbara, had been, if not image-makers, then image-subsidisers of The Project, so this bit of literati

froth stained Number 10's crisp linen a little. The Project had originally been focused on forming an axis of power with the Liberal Democrats that would keep the Tories out of power for a generation and possibly forever; later, however (and after the size of Labour's 1997 majority precluded any such deal with the Lib Dems), The Project had spread its remit to the implementation of the 'Third Way' programme of market-friendly social democratic policies. The fact that the media took seriously what the PM's press spokesman called Follett's 'self-indulgent ranting' marked an early battle in the trivia-versus-spin war that would develop between the Prime Minister's office and some quarters of the Press.

On its own, this chattering-class spat might have been treated as a seasonal bit of fluff, like the first cuckoo story of the silly season. But the PM had just called for drunken young yobs to be frog-marched to cashpoints for on-the-spot fines, only to be smartly contradicted by police chiefs. That was nothing compared with the humiliation that was to follow, when his 16-year-old son, Euan, was found face down in his own vomit in Leicester Square, in his West End première as a young hooray. (In fairness, the performance ran for one night only.)

Memos had started to leak from Number 10 in what looked like an orchestrated campaign further to discredit New Labour's image machine. Blair himself was seen to have declared concerns that the Government was perceived as weak on the family and on crime and called for a high-profile initiative 'that I can be personally associated with' (hence, presumably, the great cashpoint sanction). This was followed by the revelation that Blair's focus-group guru, Philip Gould, had written a panicky memo to the effect that The Project was in deep trouble with the electorate.

The Blair family retreated to their royal villa in Tuscany for the millennium summer holidays, but the image crisis wasn't quite over. Blair *père* had appeared on the front of Sunday newspapers clutching his newborn son Leo at his christening in the Sedgefield constituency. This had angered the PM, as it had been contrary to agreements with the Press with regard to limiting intrusion into the family's privacy. (The angry reaction also demonstrated that, contrary to opinions expressed in some newspapers, the Blairs have never actually sought to exploit the birth of Leo for PR purposes.)

In what looked like a fit of pique, the Blairs cancelled their Tuscan photo-call, a quasi-royal exercise in which early photos are exchanged for privacy during a holiday that coincides with a period of yawning space to fill in newspapers. With the Blairs reported to be chippy about the Press – perhaps for the first time – an ill-humoured photo-call was reinstated.

But the Blairs could reflect, as the Tory Press had been quick to point out, that the sure touch with the media had appeared to desert them. This should not matter much – all prime ministers, indeed all in the public eye, have their ups and downs with the media. But it mattered all the more to Blair, as the icon of New Labour, because of the alleged presidential style of the new regime. New Labour had galloped to power in 1997 on media stallions, trampling John Major's dead-beat PR into the turf – the spin-culture mattered to Number 10. It followed that its demise would matter too.

With hindsight, the spin-culture was in rude health for the first three years after the great victory of 1997. The PM's personal ratings were astronomically higher than any of the opposition, parliamentary or from within his own party. Meanwhile, former tabloid political journalist Alastair Campbell, as new Press Secretary, protected him from the media wet-work of politics through the application of classic newspaper personnel management – a combination of fear and favour, in this case applied to lobby briefings with parliamentary correspondents. An early review of the civil service's information system, combined with an alleged and uncharacteristic laddish edge that made the last memorable PM's Press Secretary, Bernard Ingham, look and sound staid by comparison, helped establish Number 10's communications machine as a paradigm of the new spin-culture.

Sure, there were communications hiccups along the way. Not just with policy – the failure of the repeal of Clause 28 and the control-freakery of devolved assemblies in Wales, Scotland and London, to name just two. Governments should expect problems with the communication of policy implementation. But there were also crises in the communications machine itself. Peter Mandelson had to resign from government twice. The first was as Trade and Industry Secretary, after it emerged that he had an absurd mortgage arrangement with Paymaster-General Geoffrey Robinson, whose

own offshore financial arrangements were producing some negative PR for the Government. The second, over what turned out to be misplaced sensitivities, attached to the granting of passports to the Hinduja brothers. Less significantly, the likely lad of Number 11, Charlie Whelan, had to quit Chancellor Gordon Brown's side, as a spin-doctor who failed to realise there was more to this business than promoting your own man's interests over others. (Campbell took this point on board early on.)

But these peccadilloes could – and were – cast in the light of New Labour growing up. It had been a long time in opposition – nearly 18 years – and there were bound to be growing pains in New Labour's adolescence. Occasionally, even New Labour could be expected to be found lying face-down in its own puke. Overall, the spin-culture was in robust good health and the spin-doctor had arrived in Britain. Special advisers in Government blossomed. In the corporate, commercial world, spin-doctors were in demand as never before. The telecoms and information-technology revolutions were driving corporate globalisation by the late Nineties. Nation was speaking unto nation like never before. And they needed to know what to say. Communication was sexy. Communication was the new rock 'n' roll. It followed that good communications advice was a hot commodity. By this time, more undergraduates wanted to enter PR than journalism. The hubristic claimed that PR was not only at the boardroom table but in the Cabinet Room too. Note that the Chancellor married a PR professional, Sarah Macaulay of 'Integrity PR' firm Hobsbawm Macaulay.

But somewhere, at the start of the twenty-first century, it all started to go wrong. Spin became the new sleaze. It became healthy to talk of its demise. Maybe it was the Dome. Maybe it was a more general disenchantment with New Labour policies, or the lack of them. Quite suddenly, the spin-doctor became a pariah, a sell-stock, someone with whom not to be seen in polite society. Some would claim that this is nothing new. And it is true that there has always been a somewhat paranoid disregard for PR among journalists – and to some degree, it is a reciprocated contempt. When Matthew Parris, then *The Times*' parliamentary sketchwriter, wrote in the mid-Nineties that he hated PR, I replied in the same paper that, since journalists and MPs regularly appeared at the bottom of

league tables of respectability and trustworthiness, then if Matthew hated PR it was definitely a trade I wanted to be in.

Historically, journalists have resented PR people because they hold the power-supply of information – and they have found it fun to bite the hand that feeds them, like rebellious teenagers turning on their parents. PR people have disliked journalists because they have their own minds and don't do as they're told. But there is a new mood in the air that goes beyond normal professional hostilities. Spin-culture is the new decadence and its extermination appears actively to be sought by what used to be called 'all right-thinking people'. It was fleetingly fashionable – now almost any effort at advocacy in communications can be met with the charge that it is spin, which means that it is a lie, or at least obfuscation. There is an argument that we should perhaps not take all this too seriously – politics and its practitioners have long been dubious in the public mind and traditional public relations have traditionally been treated with Anglo-Saxon scepticism. 'You would say that, wouldn't you' is an attitude prevalent in the UK and relatively rare in the US. But my point is that the opposite of substance is not spin. Good corporate or political communication is about dialectics. And to be dialectical, you have to hold a position. That means the skills of advocacy. And you can't advocate the absence of something. It follows that good communication requires (or demands) substance; it doesn't seek to replace or usurp it.

The problem arises where communicators usurp their subjects. The danger signs are apparent when spin becomes the story itself. An early symptom of this may have been the BBC2 documentary by Michael Cockerell broadcast in July 2000, which, over 80 minutes, purported to be a fly-on-the-wall examination of how Campbell managed the media court at Number 10. In the Spring of 2002 spin was bizarrely made the top story by the embarrassments of Stephen Byers as Transport Secretary and rather soppy allegations and counter-allegations about the PM's vanity at public occasions. Much of this is silly – all of it is less important than peace in a prosperous economy, which is the pious priority of government (the maintenance of power being the less pious one). But a star burns brightest before its implosion.

It may be, then, that the early years of the twenty-first century were, in the biblical sense, spin-culture's last days. If so, its demise will be an event to look back on from the vantage point of a replacement culture. But, in any event, communications functions have become important in the conduct of politics and business and are a formidable industry in their own right. So, if the peculiar phenomenon known as spin is to wither on the grapevine, we should know what to require and to expect when the communications industry emerges chastened on the other side of change.

This book examines where spin came from, where it is going and what happens next – not just in politics and business, but also in the wider environment of communication as a means of advocacy. I have spent two decades in the media – in round terms, the first in journalism and the second in commercial communication. The book covers those decades, partly because I was there and therefore I know about them, but more importantly because it was 20 years ago that Thatcherism found its communicational feet and, I contend, the modern spin-culture emerges from that period, changing the conduct of politics, business and the media.

I have larded the narrative with re-edited excerpts from diaries, notes and articles that I wrote at the time, which I hope are illustrative and relieve the analytical text of unbroken pomposity. I hope, too, that they help the spinning of the yarn.

MEDIA

How the West was spun

Spin wasn't invented during the past 20 years, or even 20 years ago. There really is nothing new in spin. So long as there have been peoples to be influenced, there have been spinners. St John spun the teachings of Christ, in the sense that the synoptic gospels dealt with what He did, while John addressed what He meant. Tacitus spun the Roman Empire (there are rumours he tried to muscle in on Emperor Hadrian's funeral). Cardinal Wolsey spun Henry VIII to the Pope, though the penalties for failure were rather greater in those days. William Pitt the Younger spun George III, superbly counterbalanced by the satirical caricatures of James Gilray. In the modern era, the great press barons – Harmsworth/Northcliffe, Rothermere, Beaverbrook, Kemsley, Camrose, Hartwell and Astor, all in the shadow of America's William Randolph Hearst – created fresh demand for the statesman's interpreters, or spin-doctor as we would call them today. Sigmund Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, was doing it for major American consumer-product corporations before the Second World War. In our own day, Prime Minister John Major had journalists Sheila Gunn and Sarah Hogg, wife of junior minister Douglas Hogg, and the awesomely clever Jonathan Hill – though Back to Basics, Wait and See and the Cones Hotline would suggest that the art was enjoying only a primitive revival. Harold Wilson had Joe Haines and, further back, Winston Churchill had Brendan Bracken and Queen Victoria had Benjamin Disraeli (or, possibly, vice versa). But 20 years ago there was a turning point, the start of a new communications age, whose components, from the financial markets to industry and politics, would conspire to bring us the spin industries that underpinned our spin-culture.

Twenty years ago Margaret Thatcher found her prime ministerial feet at Number 10. Depending where you stood in the political spectrum of the time, this was either the dawning of a new age of enlightenment (Boris Johnson, Conservative) or a time when mothers' milk curdled in the breast and crops began to fail (John O'Farrell, Socialist). Too many portents have been ascribed to the rise of Margaret Thatcher. It's true that if you were unfortunate enough to be a miner, or a nurse, or a print-worker in Fleet Street, nothing would ever be the same again, but she was led by her times as much as she was a leader of them – at least, initially. The grocer's daughter from Grantham, a hard-working meritocrat who nevertheless at first embraced a grand old Toryism (with affirming appointments such as that of Francis Pym and Peter Carrington), while bringing into the front-line the new mercantile class (such as Cecil Parkinson and Michael Heseltine), was truly classless. Not in the sense of her anointed successor, John Major, who managed spectacularly to be completely devoid of class, but in the sense of being beyond class, even – perversely enough – above class.

She did not, however, personally impose this classlessness, or anything else, on the Press. She barely knew or cared that the Press was there. Again, depending on where you stand on Mrs Thatcher – whether, by preference, on her reputation or on her throat – she was either uncompromisingly single-minded or dangerously ignorant in her apathy and/or contempt for the Press. Bernard Ingham, who started as her Press Secretary (following the brief tenure of Henry James) and finished as her apologist and faithful Boswell, dictated the Prime Minister's press policy in a manner that was potentially far more dangerously autocratic than any move that Alastair Campbell could later make in the same role for Tony Blair.

Blair has been known to read a newspaper and, more significantly in this comparison, to worry about what it said. Thatcher ignored the Press. Not that she made a conscious decision to avoid it – the truth is that she barely noticed it. Ingham pressed upon her his own carefully edited highlights and lowlights of the morning's papers. As like as not, this would include the consistently supportive tabloid The *Sun*, which was vital for the almost sexual stimulation of the new C2D2 aspirant middle-classes